

## Advocacy networks and Romani politics in Central and Eastern Europe

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## **Advocacy Networks and Romani Politics in Central and Eastern Europe**

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# Advocacy Networks and Romani Politics in Central and Eastern Europe

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*This article explores the impact of the activity of international solidarity and human rights organizations on the political involvement of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. It will conclude that the increase of an international advocacy network focussing on the plight of the Roma has offered new opportunities to domestic Romani organizations for pressuring governments to change state behaviour or to introduce new policy. In some cases, governments have even appointed Romani personalities from well-known advocacy organizations to advisory positions. However, the influence of a growing advocacy network has not been able yet to create a better democratically elected representation of the Roma in the central arenas of political decision-making on domestic level. Moreover, within domestic Romani movements there is growing discussion about the legitimacy and accountability of Romani advisors.*

## I. Introduction

Transnational advocacy networks have in recent years attracted the attention of scholars discussing the diffusion and power of international norms (e.g. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse *et al.* 1999). One of the arguments proposed in this literature contends that through emphasizing the norms of universal human rights, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are able to support domestic opposition movements demanding political change in norm-violating states. For example, Risse and Sikkink (1999: 5) argue that international NGOs advocating human rights have played a crucial role in mobilizing domestic opposition and legitimating the claims of local social movements in such diverse regions as Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a growing transnational advocacy network focusing on the situation of ethnic minorities in Central and Eastern Europe. Many international NGOs started to criticize the maltreatment of minority citizens in these countries and conducted campaigns aimed at changing government behaviour, educating citizens and raising awareness of rights within minority communities.<sup>1</sup> In the context of the above literature, one wonders what this advocacy has meant for the ethnic minorities themselves and, in particular, for minority members aspiring to represent their communities in domestic politics. In other words, in what way has the increasing activity of international NGOs

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<sup>1</sup> Some important examples are Human Rights Watch, Minority Rights Group, Project on Ethnic Relations and the Soros Foundations Network.

working in the sphere of human rights and minority community development influenced the political aspirations of minorities?

This article explores this question for the case of the Romani communities in Central and Eastern Europe. 'Roma' is the name increasingly used by politicians, activists and academics to refer to a wide variety of communities predominantly occurring in Central and Eastern Europe that have adopted different group and sub-group names over time (Guy 2001: xiv).<sup>2</sup> Although these communities have been very diverse, they share the fact that throughout history a similar negative meaning has generally been assigned to their identities. The introduction of the term 'Roma' reflects an attempt to break away from this social stigma and to produce a more positive image of themselves as a single ethnic group occurring in different countries. Since the breakdown of communism, and even more since the beginning of the process of European Union enlargement to the East, well-known human rights NGOs have devoted special attention to the position of the Roma and to the failure of states to protect them from discrimination and socio-economic marginalization. At the same time, Romani activists from within communities have established political organizations, and have attempted to represent the Roma in domestic and international political relations.<sup>3</sup>

The question then is: Has the activity of international solidarity and human rights organizations been perceived as a clear point of support by those Roma who want to represent their communities in domestic politics? To explore the issues surrounding this question, this article starts with a discussion of Romani political participation in the narrow sense – meaning their participation in domestic party politics and their representation in national legislatures – in a selection of countries in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>4</sup> I will reflect on the possible reasons of why gaining access to politics through participation in parliamentary elections has by no means been easy for the Roma. In the second part of the article, I will reflect on the

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<sup>2</sup> The total number of Roma in Europe is estimated to be somewhere between 6 and 8 million. Official figures per country, mostly based on self-identification in censuses, are much lower and amount to a total of approx. 2.5 million. An overview of both estimates and official census figures can be found on <http://errc.org/publications/factsheets/numbers.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> One of the recent major developments in this direction was the Fifth World Romani Congress in July 2000 in Prague, where the International Romani Union (IRU) – the organization that claims to form the representation of all the Roma in the world – reframed the status of the Roma from a minority to 'a full nation without a territory' (Acton and Klímová 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Although it is not the aim of this article to present an exhaustive survey of Romani political participation, I have chosen to include reference to a large number of countries in post-communist Central Europe for reasons of providing the reader with a more or less general overview of elected Romani representation in Central and Eastern Europe.

political mobilization of the Roma in the broader sense, meaning the influence exerted on governments and legislative bodies by non-elected actors, such as Romani protest organizations or non-Romani solidarity and advocacy organizations. In comparison to their political participation in the narrow sense, Romani political activism in the broad sense seems to have been more successful.

This article will argue that the growth of a transnational advocacy network around the situation of the Roma has offered the Roma unprecedented opportunities for political mobilization. But the success of international advocacy has, at the same time, also created new divisions within domestic Romani movements. Most importantly, discussions have arisen among Romani activists about who is entitled to represent the Roma in policy debates. An increasing number of individuals from advocacy organizations (both Roma and non-Roma) have been selected to governmental positions and have become important actors in policy preparation. Aspiring Romani politicians have sometimes argued that these appointed positions do not fulfil the role of authentic Romani representatives because they are not accountable to a Romani constituency, but depend on the government. I will detail the discussion about representation and accountability within the Romani movement at the end of this article by focusing briefly on recent developments in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

## **II. Romani participation in electoral politics**

### *Roma in mainstream political parties*

Since the beginning of the 1990s, several Romani candidates in various countries in Central and Eastern Europe have contested parliamentary elections for main political parties. In some instances Romani candidates were able to enter the central arenas of political power through participating in or forging alliances with such a political party. This seems to have been possible especially in the beginning of the 1990s, in those cases where the formation of political parties was primarily based on the division between Communists and anti-Communists. The number one example is Czechoslovakia, where in the 1990 elections a total of eleven MPs who identified themselves as Roma were elected to the various parliamentary assemblies of the country as candidates for the large dissident movements Public Against Violence (VPN) and Civic Forum (OF). Later, mainstream parties included only a very limited number of Roma in their candidate lists. In the 1998 elections in the Czech Republic,

one MP who identifies herself as Romani was elected for the Freedom Union (US). In Hungary, the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz) brought two Romani candidates into the Hungarian National Assembly in 1990 and one in 1994. One Romani MP was member of the parliamentary fraction of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP) between 1990 and 1994. In Bulgaria, the elections of 1994, 1997 and 1998 brought each time one Romani MP into parliament on a mainstream party ticket. In the most recent Bulgarian elections in June 2001, a Romani candidate from the list of the winning National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) and one from the Coalition For Bulgaria, an electoral coalition led by the Socialist Party, were elected. In the last Romanian parliamentary elections (November 2000) the Party of Social Democracy in Romania (PDSR) brought one candidate who identifies himself as Romani into parliament.

As this list suggests, the total number of Roma elected to national legislatures on mainstream party tickets has remained very low throughout most of the decade and in some cases there has even been a visible negative trend. Also the proportion of Roma in winnable positions on mainstream party lists has remained low. This is somewhat striking in light of the current electoral competition in the region. In some countries, a party could secure or tilt current power balances simply by attracting large parts of the Romani voters. Nonetheless, mainstream parties in general have not deeply engaged in such attempts. They have usually argued that good Romani politicians are few and far between and that putting Romani politicians on the list does not necessarily mean that Roma will effectively vote for them.<sup>5</sup> A number of aspiring Romani politicians have admitted that there is no strong indication that Roma will automatically vote for Romani candidates, independent of the ideological position of the list on which they stand. But they contend that a Romani political elite is clearly emerging (see e.g. remarks in PER 2001b). It is not unlikely that through active investment in the development of this elite, mainstream political parties could mobilize more Romani voters. Specific initiatives could be taken, such as organizing discussion workshops to foster debate between Romani and non-Romani politicians, or holding information sessions to encourage Roma to stand and participate in elections.

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<sup>5</sup> A number of NGOs in various countries have observed that Roma vote for a variety of parties. In some cases Romani voters are attracted to parties that have a clear anti-minority stance. For example, during the Romanian parliamentary elections of November 2000 the organization Romani Criss observed that a surprisingly high number of Roma voted for the nationalist Great Romania Party (RM). (Necula 2000)

According to many other Roma, the biggest problem hindering Romani presence in mainstream political parties lies in the fact that non-Romani voters have a negative attitude towards Roma on candidate lists (see e.g. remarks made by Slovak Romani activists in PER 1999: 12). Moreover, they criticize mainstream politicians for generally not having attempted to change that attitude. It is no doubt true that many political parties in the region have avoided supporting the Roma for fear of losing votes and that they in some cases have used anti-Romani rhetoric to buttress populist electoral campaigns. Having observed this, a number of Romani activists have decided not to engage in mainstream parties anymore. They have believed it to be more fruitful to build Romani political representation through establishing specific Romani political parties that aim to attract and represent an ethnic constituency.<sup>6</sup> Especially in countries where other political parties have been successful in mobilizing ethnic constituencies – as for example in Slovakia, Romania, Macedonia and Bulgaria – Romani activists have indeed experimented with establishing their own ethnic parties.

#### *Romani political parties*

However, ethnic Romani parties have very rarely been viable in electoral terms. For example, the political party Romani Civic Initiative (ROI) in the Czech Republic has participated on its own in national elections, without the close affiliation it had with the Civic Forum in the 1990 Czechoslovak elections, but has never come even close to passing the parliamentary threshold of 5 per cent. Recent attempts in Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia point in the same direction. In the November 2000 elections in Romania, only two Romani parties stood for election. Their most successful candidate, a member of the Romani Party (Partida Romilor), reached only 0.66 per cent of the votes for the Chamber of Deputies. Given the 5 per cent threshold, this was far from enough to send a representative to parliament. Nevertheless the Romani Party was able to fill the reserved minority seat. As part of an electoral protocol another member of the Romani Party was put on the PDSR list and indeed elected to parliament (PER 2000). This means that together with the Romani candidate who has been elected from the PDSR list the current Romanian parliament contains two deputies who identify themselves as Romani representatives. The Bulgarian electoral system does not allow the formation of

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<sup>6</sup> For example, during an international conference on Romani political participation organized by the OSCE and the Czech Foreign Ministry in Prague in December 2000, the president of the International Romani Union (IRU) Emil Šcuka urged fellow activists not to engage in politics of the left or the right. In his view the basis for Romani political participation was “to forget ideological differences: no Liberalism or Christian-Democracy, but *Romipen*.” He continued to state that “many Roma say that this is wrong, that this is nationalism. But all we want to do is protect the Roma.” (own observation)

political parties on the basis of ethnicity,<sup>7</sup> but in the elections of June 2001, the Romani organization EuroRoma formed an electoral coalition with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), which traditionally has attracted mostly voters from the Turkish minority. This coalition party managed to gain twenty-one seats, but no Romani candidates were elected. A coalition called the National Union Tsar Kiro, which was known to be an electoral coalition of Romani organizations, also failed to attract a high number of voters and foundered at 0.6 per cent of the vote. The only relatively exceptional case seems to be Macedonia, where two Romani MPs secured seats in parliament in 1990 on the list of a party called Party for Total Emancipation of Roma in Macedonia (PTER). In the current Macedonian parliament there is one MP for a party called the Alliance of Roma in Macedonia (SRM). In Slovakia, a number of parties, including ROI, have recently attempted to unite Romani politicians in an electoral platform in order to form a united front in the next parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2002. Although this has no doubt been a useful exercise fostering communication among Romani activists, it remains to be seen whether this platform will survive until the elections. Already one Slovak Romani party called the Slovak Romani Initiative (RIS) was not willing to participate. Instead, RIS signed a cooperation agreement with current populist opposition party Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) of former premier Vladimír Mečiar, not exactly a party that is known for its pro-minority stance, but nevertheless is perceived by RIS as a safer bet in electoral terms.<sup>8</sup>

In general, Romani parties based solely on ethnic affiliation in all of these countries have done very poorly in elections, though there have been a few exceptions on the municipal level. The success of political parties of ethnic minorities is in general dependent on a number of structural or substantive factors. One factor that may have played a role in this case is the structural composition of the potential electorate of these parties. For example, the fact that Romani communities have a younger age structure means that a smaller share of their population is of voting age. But apart from such structural reasons, there may have also been more substantive causes for their low voter support. One such reason could be that those few Romani party representatives who had been elected in the past, have not been able to

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<sup>7</sup> Based on the idea that ethnic cleavage, if politicized, could form a threat to state sovereignty, Article 11 of the Bulgarian Constitution bans parties based on ethnic or religious membership. However, ethnicity continues to play a certain role in party development. For example, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) party represents a constituency of mostly Turkish Bulgarians (see e.g. Karasimeonov 1998: 348)

<sup>8</sup> In the 1998 elections HZDS had two Romani candidates on its list coming from ROI. However, the Romani candidate with the best place on the list died only weeks before the elections and was not replaced. The other Romani candidate was not elected.



introduce tangible change within local Romani communities and have therefore not been able to gain the trust of Romani voters. Another reason might have been the intrinsic difficulty of establishing a party programme that represents the widely diverse demands and concerns of the Romani minority as a whole. Or it could have been the difficulty of communicating such programmes to potential voters who live dispersed throughout the country in sometimes isolated communities with no access to media. It may also have been the case that Romani communities have feared that casting votes for ethnic parties would further marginalize them or would keep their communities outside central politics.

Factors related to the electoral system may also have played a role. For example, electoral thresholds in the Slovak and Czech Republics have prevented smaller parties from entering the legislature in order to prevent fragmentation. This has made it more difficult for parties that want to attract voters on the principle of minority membership. For Romani parties in the Czech Republic, for example, the electoral threshold is somewhat higher than the proportion of Roma among the total number of citizens. As a result, it is not very likely that Roma will get into parliament through an ethnic political party.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, in recent national elections in the Czech Republic, there have been no serious attempts to form Romani electoral coalitions. Romania equally maintains a 5 per cent parliamentary threshold, but has introduced special provisions regarding the election of deputies representing minority organizations. As a result, ethnic minority parties there that fail to pass the threshold can make use of a reserved seat in parliament. In Hungary, parties equally have to meet a 5 per cent threshold, but a system of secured seats in parliament has not yet been introduced although it is constitutionally required.<sup>10</sup> However, an elaborate system of minority self-governments there has created a special form of minority representation for issues related to the collective rights that national and ethnic minorities enjoy in Hungary, more specifically rights in the field of education, media, and culture, and the collective use of minority languages.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Romani population in the Czech Republic is estimated to be at the most approx. 3 per cent of the total population. Official figures for Romani presence in the Czech Republic are well below 1 per cent of the population.

<sup>10</sup> See Article 68, par. 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Hungary and Article 20, par. 1 of the Act LXXVII of 1993 on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities.

<sup>11</sup> A critical reflection on the self-government system in Hungary can be found in Cahn (2001)

### *Evaluating Romani representation in politics*

How can we judge the current political representation of Roma in national parliaments in Central and Eastern Europe? With regard to ‘descriptive representation’ – meaning the representation of the demographic characteristics of the electorate – the composition of these parliaments is clearly problematic since they largely exclude the Roma as a demographic group. One has thus to ask whether Roma have some degree of ‘substantive representation’ – the representation of the policy interests of that part of the electorate, independent of the presence of their members in the legislature. As described above, there are indications that there are serious defects in the latter form of representation too. First of all, the presence of Romani candidates on lists of mainstream political parties has been low. Political parties usually avoid policy proposals that engage in a full response to the problems that face the Roma. Moreover, politicians have sometimes pandered to voters’ hostility towards Roma in order to get elected. Many Romani activists have felt that their demands were not taken seriously by non-ethnic political parties, even if these had strongly supported minority rights in their programme declarations. Romani candidates who have occasionally appeared on mainstream party lists have often felt that they were not in a strong enough position to enhance the scope of Romani representation through that party. Instances of mainstream parties supporting Romani candidates have often been considered by Roma as evidence of shrewd political calculation rather than as a dedication to tolerance and acceptance or real initiatives toward policy building.<sup>12</sup>

One could argue that in order to enhance the substantive representation of the Roma, they will need a better descriptive representation in parliament. There are some mechanisms that could lead to such a better descriptive representation. For example, lowering the parliamentary threshold is a way of facilitating the presence of minority members in parliament. A system of reserved seats, however, provides a more effective mechanism to guarantee a minimal presence of the Roma in parliament. Although minimal presence will not be sufficient to guarantee a better substantive representation of Romani interests, there are some reasons for

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<sup>12</sup> An example of a discussion among Romani activists surrounding these topics can be found in the publications of *Project on Ethnic Relations* (PER), in particular in PER (1999) and PER (2001b). For example, during a roundtable about ‘Political Participation and the Roma’ organized by PER in Košice in March 1998, one participant “questioned the strategy of forming partnerships with majority parties; he suspected that these parties were only using the Roma to gain votes.” Another Romani participant from the Czech Republic “urged that Slovak Romani parties not ‘sell themselves short’ when negotiating with the majority parties. He stated that “[t]he Slovak Romani parties should try to find strategic partners from among the majority parties, but it was not so important whether these partners were on the left or the right; what was important was that they learn to work together and build trust.” (PER 1999: 8)

considering it an important precondition. It can symbolize the idea that Roma should be considered an essential part of the national electorate and that as such they need representation in the national parliament. Moreover, the presence of Roma can at least trigger debate on public policy from the perspective of the members of this community. It could also help to facilitate a process of political emancipation. For example, the elected Roma would have the guarantee of being able to gain experience in parliamentary representation and would almost certainly enhance the profile of the ethnic party they are representing. At present, such a system of guaranteed seats for the Roma exists in Romania and is being debated in Hungary (see e.g. PER 2001a).

However, to date the overall development of Romani representation in electoral politics and national legislatures in Central and Eastern Europe has been one of very little progress. Although in some countries the Roma form a large enough part of the population in order to be a deciding factor in parliamentary elections, as good as no mainstream parties have really attempted to use this factor. Governments, however, increasingly realize that a better political participation of their Romani minorities will very likely result in a much more positive international evaluation of their minority policy. As the attention of the international community for minority questions in Central and Eastern Europe has been growing, the exclusion or inclusion of minorities in domestic politics has become an important factor in the international reputation of a country. In the context of the challenge of European integration which these countries now face, international organizations have more than once emphasized that there is a need to increase the presence of Roma in politics (See e.g. van der Stoel 2000: 130). This is arguably one of the reasons why the non-electoral political action of the Roma has gained significance.

### **III. Romani political mobilization and advocacy networks**

#### *New opportunities*

There is of course more to politics than just elections, and elected representatives are not the only ones to defend the interests of a certain population. Today, the formation and monitoring of public policy is markedly influenced also by non-elected actors. In the case of the Roma, these actors have mostly been domestic or international NGOs working in the field of human rights, but also Romani self-help organizations and expert networks. This collection of actors could be seen as an example of an advocacy network. In the words of Keck and Sikkink

(1998: 8-9) an advocacy network is a network “organized to promote causes, principled ideas, and norms” which often involves “individuals advocating policy changes that cannot be easily linked to a rationalist understanding of their ‘interests’” (advocates plead the causes of others). The question then is: What influence have advocacy networks had on the process of Romani political mobilization in the broad sense in Central and Eastern Europe?

Let us first have a look at advocacy actors in general and their role in political mobilization. On the one hand, advocacy actors are generally independent organizations or individuals and do not engage in the support of any political group in any country. On the other hand, they are to some extent political because they defend norms that are seen as valid across state borders, and that activity often includes scrutinizing those governments that do not comply with those norms. Research on international NGOs in the human rights sector shows that these organizations generally have played a crucial role in transforming state sovereignty (Risse and Sikkink 1999). First of all, they have contributed a great deal to the establishment of human rights standards in international law. Secondly, in many cases they have supported domestic civil society in protesting a state’s violations of international norms. Through their activities they have demonstrated that the power of political leaders is limited. Their involvement may lead governments to change policy, or in certain cases it may trigger the transformation of a whole political regime.

During the last decade of the twentieth century a number of international human rights NGOs started to research and document the human rights situation of the Roma in Europe. Particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, they found that Roma were disproportionately affected by the economic and political changes after 1989 and had become the number one victim of discrimination. However, protecting them from discrimination or changing their situation were not among the political priorities of the new political leaders who were ostensibly preoccupied with other aspects of transition politics. As of the beginning of the 1990s, international human rights NGOs started to criticize those governments that ignored the conditions of many Roma’s daily lives. For example, in this period Human Rights Watch published a series of reports on the situation of the Roma in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and the Czechoslovakia, concentrating on a wide range of issues from education to unequal access to public and private services (Helsinki Watch 1991a, 1991b; Human Rights Watch 1992, 1993).

The effects of this international attention on the position of Romani activists in Central and Eastern Europe seems to have been immense. First, the advocacy network around Romani issues made governments and society more aware of the normative context of minority treatment. It triggered governments to deal with the demands of minorities and think about new legislation. The latter half of the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe has also witnessed a clear increase in special government programmes targeted at Romani communities. Although changes have not always been tangible on the local level, a growing number of declarations and plans have been produced by the central authorities aimed at demonstrating the willingness of governments to alter the situation of the Roma in relation to education, health and welfare or unemployment. The content of these government programmes addresses issues raised by human rights organizations. In certain cases international advocacy organizations have directly influenced the wording of new proposals in legislation and policy. For example, in August 2000 the Romanian government adopted an Antidiscrimination Ordinance, which was clearly influenced by demands of international human rights organizations (Zoon 2001: 21-22). Another example of this is a policy document adopted by the Bulgarian government in 1999 entitled 'Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society'. The principles of this document had been drafted by a Bulgarian NGO (Human Rights Project) and had been discussed and signed by a broad coalition of Romani organizations (Russinov 2001). As is apparent from this last example, international human rights organizations have also provided domestic ethnically-based Romani NGOs with the powerful tool of the language of international human rights to make their claims towards the government and to attract support from ordinary Romani citizens.

Furthermore, the increased attention for Roma went hand in hand with a flow of financial and technical resources to the new democracies through private foundations and international organizations (see for example the European Union's Phare programme). New funds became available to organizations that explicitly aimed to defend the rights of Romani minorities and support the establishment of new Romani civic organizations. The Soros foundations network, for instance, has been a most prominent defender of such a strategy and made financial support available to a large number of projects and initiatives.<sup>13</sup> Projects sponsored by international donors were partly aimed at stimulating a change in the society at large through human rights reporting, providing legal assistance to Romani citizens or influence mass media

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<sup>13</sup> For example, in 1999 the Soros foundations network spent a total of approximately \$7 million on Romani programs. See <http://www.soros.org/netprog.html>

reporting. Influential organizations in these fields have been the Budapest-based European Roma Rights Center and Roma Press Center. Other projects have been directed towards the development of Romani communities themselves, see for example the Roma Participation Program of the Open Society Institute (OSI), which organizes training for Romani activists.

The advocacy network has also wanted to stand for values of democracy. Several international NGOs have tried to provide a source of education in the field of democracy and political organization towards a Romani audience, or they have offered the wider audience a new perspective on the social situation of the Roma through emphasizing universal norms of equity. Advocacy actors have also criticized discriminatory language and thus helped to produce a more positive image of Romani activists and politicians.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as the lack of political representation of Roma was increasingly seen as a democratic deficit, certain NGOs started to take the lead in fostering a better representation. Some recent OSI programmes, for example, were explicitly linked to the engagement of Roma in politics.<sup>15</sup> Another international NGO – Project on Ethnic Relations (PER) – has also contributed to the formation of a credible Romani leadership by organizing roundtable discussions to which both politicians in power and selected Roma representatives have been brought together. In Romania and Bulgaria, international and domestic NGOs played a major role in bringing Romani organizations into a dialogue with government.

And last, one of the political consequences of the increased attention from human rights NGOs has been the growing awareness of international governmental organizations for the plight of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. International criticism expressed by NGOs ostensibly led to enhanced monitoring of the situation of the Roma by international governmental organizations. Human rights NGOs have intentionally directed communication towards the international community where they are often seen as more credible lobbies than

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<sup>14</sup> There are clearly limits to what advocacy actors can do in this respect. For example, NGOs do not have a direct control over public opinion. Government officials and the media play a huge role in shaping the attitude of the majority towards minority citizens. The emigration of Romani refugees from Central and Eastern Europe to European Union countries, for example, has very noticeably influenced increased attention from EU governments and has induced emotional debates in the countries from where they have fled. The role of politicians in power has been of overriding importance here. Domestic Roma activists have tried to persuade public opinion that Romani emigration is in fact the result of failing policies to prevent discrimination or secure equal social and economic opportunity. In contrast, the Central and Eastern Europe governments themselves have often portrayed Romani emigration as purely driven by economic calculation. Although human rights NGOs have tried to emphasize the human rights concerns of those fleeing the country, politicians in the domestic arena seem mostly to have reinforced a view of the Roma as an economic migrant.

<sup>15</sup> See the OSI programs ‘Public administration training program for elected Roma leaders’ and ‘Roma political leadership program’, both organized in Budapest.

local representative organizations. A recent example of such activity was the presentation in the European Parliament in March 2001 of the OSI study 'On the margins' (Zoon 2001) about the unequal access to social safety nets and public services in Central and Eastern Europe. Ostensibly, it is the result of human rights NGOs lobbying and looking for international media attention that now both the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have special bodies to monitor the position of the Roma in their respective member states. The example of the OSCE is an interesting one, as its special body for Romani affairs, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues, which is a part of the OSCE's Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), has recently also started with directly fostering Romani political participation.<sup>16</sup>

The growth of an advocacy network around Romani issues has significantly triggered processes of domestic Romani mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe and will probably continue to do so. It has triggered a process of change in governments' attitudes towards the problems facing the Roma, and it has indirectly fostered domestic Romani activism. It also appears to have revived an international Romani movement that had more or less come to a halt at the end of the 1980s. International associations that have attempted to ground themselves within Romani communities, such as the Roma National Congress (RNC), have made explicit use of the language of international human rights. In the second half of the 1990s, a new impetus was also given to the International Romani Union (IRU). In this sense, the emergence of a network of international NGOs active in the field of human rights and with a focus on the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe has been a significant factor determining the growth of Romani political aspirations and the formation of a Romani political identity.

The reason why advocacy actors have been able to play such an important role in politics most likely lies in the fact that both governments and Romani activists have taken them seriously. Governments have regarded advocacy actors as credible critics of the situation of the oppressed because such actors represent internationally valid principles, and not the

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<sup>16</sup> In December 2000 the OSCE and the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized an international conference on 'Roma and political participation' in Prague. The stated purpose of the conference was to look for ways to improve the public role of Roma in society and to develop strategies to increase Roma political participation, drawing on the experiences of Roma leaders who have already been elected to public office.

private interests of only one group.<sup>17</sup> And Romani activists have found in advocacy organizations useful tools for pressuring their government and mobilizing their communities.

### *Romani mobilization and the problem of political representation*

However positive the influence of advocacy networks on the political mobilization of the Roma may seem at first sight, it has nonetheless confronted Romani activists with new questions. In particular, the problem surrounding the creation of a legitimate Romani representation looms large. Who has the democratic or moral mandate to speak on behalf of 'the Roma' on domestic levels as well as in the international political arena? Governmental bodies on both the international and the domestic level have not been able to include a democratically elected Romani voice in the deliberative process and have often in response established advisory and expert bodies in which mostly a number of Roma from NGOs are included. The status of these advisory and expert bodies is often not clear. Sometimes they seem more to function as representative deliberation bodies than as advisory bodies. Since both states and international organizations have emphasized that Romani representation is needed in policy deliberation, the illusion is sometimes created that experts can play the role of representatives. This has created some discussion among Roma about who has the right to 'represent' the Roma in these bodies.

On the European level, international organizations have repeatedly emphasized that initiatives targeted at the situation of the Roma must be co-designed by Romani representatives in order to be effective. But since there are no elected representatives, the Council of Europe and the OSCE have set up special offices, in which a selection of Romani members from advocacy organizations have an advisory seat (the OSCE's Contact point for Roma and Sinti and the Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies of the Council of Europe). Romani organizations themselves that are active across borders have responded to this situation by trying to establish a firm basis for further dialogue with international institutions and the people in these advisory bodies. Plausibly, one of the main motivations for transforming the IRU from a pressure group into an organization aspiring to represent "all Roma in the world", has been the increasing need for a representative Romani partner expressed by bodies in the Council of Europe, the EU and the OSCE. It is questionable, however, if the gap between local Romani communities and international institutions can be bridged by an organization like the IRU. Its

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<sup>17</sup> Some authors, for example Trehan (2001), have argued that just because advocacy organizations for Roma act from the perspective of a normative agenda, they tend to neglect the real needs of communities.



officers have been elected by the members of the organization itself and are in this sense not really representative of a European-wide Romani constituency (the boundaries of which would be very hard to define anyway). Moreover, the IRU in general has more than once been criticized for its lack of support from ordinary Roma (Acton and Klímová 2001: 162). Apart from the specificities of the IRU, it is in general questionable if European Romani political representation can be reached through including members of advocacy organizations in the process of policy preparation. It is no doubt important that ideas on how to improve the situation of the Roma are debated publicly and that Roma themselves are included in such debates. However, there is a problem when the inclusion of Roma in the discussion is portrayed as the establishment of a 'Romani representation' needed to ensure the effectiveness of the initiatives taken by these international bodies.<sup>18</sup> Public debate on policy directed towards Roma is no doubt necessary, and inviting well-known Romani activists to participate in this debate is certainly a step in that direction. But they should certainly not be seen as 'Romani representatives' responsible for ensuring the success of the initiatives taken by these international institutions. Special institutions for 'Romani representation' as they have been framed on the European level, have almost inevitably created some discussion among Romani activists about the legitimacy of the personalities included (PER 2001b: 1).

In the various national arenas, the question about legitimate representation leads to even more discussion among Romani activists. I will illustrate this with a brief reference to recent developments in Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. In the strict sense, advocacy organizations, even if they are based on Romani membership, are not the representatives of the entire Romani population of a country. They have not aimed to speak for the people in the sense of articulating and defending the claims of one group, rather they have aimed to speak and act in the name of 'an idea' (for example, in this case, the idea that Roma should not be discriminated against or that funds should be made available to address situations of poverty). In this way, advocacy organizations (Romani as well as non-Romani) are not accountable to a Romani constituency in the same way a democratically elected representative would be. However, in the three countries under consideration, the activities of advocacy organizations have led to the emergence of an identifiable group of influential Roma, or a Romani 'political elite', which have become regarded as 'representatives'. These people are often quoted in the

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<sup>18</sup> The description offered by the Council of Europe is telling: "one of the fundamental principles guiding the Council of Europe's approach is participation of the communities concerned, through Roma/Gypsy representatives and associations. Without this, no lasting progress will be accomplished." (<http://www.social.coe.int/en/cohesion/action/roma.htm>)

media, have been able to voice their opinions about concrete problems, and are often invited to international conferences. In the three countries, a number of them have been approached by the respective government to participate in dialogue or act as experts in policy formation or preparation of legal changes. In Hungary, for example, such a process of consultation took place before the elaboration of the Minorities Act of 1993. In recent years the Slovak government created the position of Government Commissioner for Roma Affairs, while the Czech Republic has organized an Interministerial Commission for Romani Community Issues, which contains a number of people from the 'Romani elite'.

Such initiatives have in general been supported by Romani activists, because they regard it as important to have a say in policy preparation. A number of Romani activists probably have seen this kind of expert function as a way to influence government from a Romani perspective without having to deal with the problems of electoral mobilization discussed earlier in this article. Moreover, for many Romani activists it was important that governments wanted to discuss new policy proposals with at least some members of the communities in question, even if these were not officially elected representatives of these communities.

But a by-product of this development has been a new division between officially acknowledged Romani advisors and Romani activists who are not officially recognized. Discussion about who has the right to be recognized as legitimate advisors seem to have surfaced in the three countries. The context of the discussion differs to a large extent between the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the one hand, and Hungary on the other hand. In the Czech and Slovak Republics the Romani participants in these bodies increasingly function as a substitute for the lack of elected Romani representation (and are probably regarded as such also by many ordinary Roma). Therefore, discussion in the Czech Republic and Slovakia mostly concerns the very weak connection that some of the selected Romani activists have with Romani communities. The governments of the two countries have to some extent created the illusion that the 'Romani elite' forms an alternative political representation, while the problem of the lack of inclusion of Roma in regular political bodies has moved into the background.

In Hungary, the problem has a somewhat different character. As a result of the Hungarian minority legislation, there is now a fifty-three-member elected National Gypsy Self-Government, which has become the official 'ethnicized' partner of the government to discuss

matters related to the minority rights of the Roma. One can say that in Hungary there *is* a form of democratically elected Romani representation. However, a debate about legitimate Romani representation is still ongoing among Romani activists. One part of the discussion relates to the way in which the National Gypsy Self-Government is elected.<sup>19</sup> Another aspect of the discussion is concerned with the way the government has treated this body. The National Gypsy Self-Government has been seen by the government as the exclusive partner for dialogue, thereby largely ‘illegitimizing’ alternative Romani advocacy organizations which have aimed at influencing policy but are not engaged in the self-government system. Certain Roma have also felt that through the establishment of this self-government system the state has neglected to care about the overall inclusion of Roma in regular political organizations.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This article has illustrated that the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe are politically underrepresented in national politics. A very low number of Roma make it into the national legislatures and very few politicians have attempted to represent Romani interests. It is sometimes claimed that the Roma are not represented because they are too divided to form a political force. Although it is true that there is a wide diversity of opinion and interest within the Romani population, it is nevertheless striking that these diverse interests have also remained absent from the various mainstream political groupings. This can hardly be blamed on fragmentation within the Romani movement.

In contrast, however, increasing numbers of Roma have in recent years found their way to an advocacy network consisting of domestic or international NGOs working in the field of human rights, community development or media. This has clearly offered new opportunities for pressuring governments to change state behaviour or to introduce new policy without engaging in elections or in party politics. Although these new strategies have led to a number of changes in policy, they have not led to a better representation of Roma in the central arenas of political decision-making. In some cases, states have attempted to institutionalize the

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<sup>19</sup> The election of the local minority self-governments is based on universal franchise and not on the ethnic identity of the voters. As a result, it is currently unclear who exactly has elected the local minority self-governments. The large number of votes cast for local Gypsy self-governments, for example, raise the suspicion that a great group of non-Romani voters have participated in the elections. A number of Romani organizations have therefore claimed that these Gypsy self-governments cannot be regarded as representative of the Roma, and that – by extension – also the National Gypsy Self-government is not really a representative body for the Romani population.

influence coming from well-known Romani collaborators of advocacy organizations through the establishment of advisory bodies. But, as the examples of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia show, this development has triggered new divisions within the Romani movement, revolving around the question of the legitimacy and the accountability of these Romani advisors.

When governments today want to design policy on problems that affect Roma, they can in many cases not include a democratically elected Romani voice in the deliberative process. To solve this problem, advisory and expert bodies have been established in which a number of Roma from NGOs are included. In itself, this is arguably a legitimate way of policy-making. However, it should be made clear that these Roma are not representing a Romani constituency and that they cannot make up for the lack of Roma individuals in democratically elected bodies. This point may sound obvious, but is often overlooked by both governments and Roma. Governments may create the false impression that there is no longer an urgent need to work on the inclusion of Roma in politics, because they have Romani experts with whom they can deliberate policy measures. While Roma have sometimes accused Romani experts and advocacy actors of not serving the cause of the Roma because they have no real constituency.

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